

## **Early Childhood Today (Scholastic) v19 n7 p16 may05**

### **Meeting Learning Challenges: Informal Year-End Assessments**

Assessing Children for End-of-Year Profiles  
by Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

Work with parents to create valuable informal profiles of children's development

Now that it's the end of the year, I'd like to create a profile of each of the children in my group to give to their parents. I'm hoping this will also help next year's teachers get a clear picture of how far the children have come this year and what to expect of them next year. Do you have any suggestions for these informal assessments?

Creating this profile will give you an extremely valuable tool. It will be especially useful if you can create the profiles in collaboration with the parents. Together you can construct a developmental profile that includes both the child's strengths and vulnerabilities.

The key to creating a profile that will benefit parents as well as other teachers is to make sure it includes the most critical areas of development. It should also reveal the child's true range of functioning, including those areas in which he is strongest, even if they are only evident some of the time.

#### **Make Joint Observations**

If the evaluation is to be a true collaboration, differences of opinion between teachers and parents will need to be resolved through joint observation and discussion. It may very well be, for example, that a child behaves one way at home and another at school. What this tells you is that the child has a range of functioning that is expressed differently, depending on the situation. All aspects of the range are meaningful for the profile. The fact that a child may hide under the chair or withdraw from other children in a noisy, overloaded environment is no less relevant than the fact that the child is a charming and creative player and debater at home.

#### **Learn What to Look For**

Educators and parents both need to be aware of where to look and what to look for. Learning from formal tests, such as whether a child is eager to stack blocks, use three-word phrases or full sentences, or search behind things for a toy, is not so essential. Unfortunately, we tend to focus on this kind of concrete and specific measure of cognitive, social, and motor ability. We have allowed our tests to determine what it is that we value rather than using common sense to establish what it is that makes a well-developing human being.

#### **Developmental Milestones**

What we should be focusing on are functional developmental milestones. Observing a child with the following six benchmarks in mind will help you see how well he is functioning compared with age-appropriate expectations:

- By 3 months, the infant learns to focus, to attend, and to calm himself. Ask yourself: Does the baby usually show interest in things around him by looking at sights and turning toward sounds?
- By 5 months, the baby engages in budding relationships with warmth and trust. Ask yourself: Does the baby seem happy or pleased to see me or other familiar people? Is the baby looking and smiling, making sounds or making some other gesture, such as moving her arms, that indicates pleasure or delight?
- By 9 months, we see purposeful interaction, accompanied by a variety of emotional gestures and facial expressions, as well as pointing at and showing people things. Ask yourself: Is the baby able to show what she wants by reaching for or pointing at something? Is he reaching out to be picked up or making purposeful noises?
- By 14 to 18 months, a child can organize a series of interactions and solve problems through social means. Ask yourself: Can the child take me to the toy area and point to the toy he wants?
- By 24 to 30 months, a child should be able to use ideas in imaginative ways, including pretend play; express needs, wants, and desires; and be able to do a little negotiating. Ask yourself: Can the toddler respond to people talking or playing with him by using words or sequences of sounds that are clearly meant to convey a word? Is the toddler able to imitate familiar actions by feeding or hugging a doll? Is the toddler able to follow simple, one-step directions, such as “Take the banana on the table,” to meet a basic need?
- By 24 to 48 months, the child should be able to logically build bridges between ideas. Ask yourself: Can the child answer the question “What do you want?” Can he engage in pretend play with another person in which the sequence of events makes sense? Can he begin to describe wishes and needs?

We want to see how well a child is able to demonstrate mastery of these six core essentials, at school and at home. (If the child is 3 or older, we expect mastery of all six milestones; if he's between 2 and 3, the first five.)

### Examine Secondary Skills

If a child is showing mastery of these six capacities, we can then look more closely at the supporting capabilities. Specifically, these include language, motor skills, sensory skills, and emotional skills. So, for example, if you are looking at the age-appropriateness of a child's language skills, you can observe whether or not he is able to articulate what he

wants in an age-appropriate manner and if he understands what others are communicating to him. To assess fine and gross motor skills, you might observe how a 4-year-old holds a pencil, or if he can run, jump, throw, and catch a ball. Looking at a child's social skills, you can see whether he can cooperate, share, and do things with other children.

However, consider these specific skills only secondarily, *after* looking at the core developmental milestones. If a child has a basic mastery of the milestones, he's probably got pretty good mastery of these "support troops." It may be the case that he has some unevenness. He may be a little slow in his fine motor abilities, or he may still not be able to throw and catch a ball. He may be able to play with other children but not be able to share very well. We can help a child practice in such specific areas.

If a child is behind in the core milestones to a significant degree, immediately recommend a complete clinical evaluation. Fortunately, there is much we can do about developmental problems. The earlier these problems are identified, the better. Remember: If a child is functioning at age-appropriate levels for the core milestones, and there is just a little difficulty with supporting skills, a little extra practice at school or at home may well do the trick.

***Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.,*** author of *The Secure Child*, is a professor at George Washington University Medical School.